



## RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE IN KOSOVO VILAYET FROM HALF OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY UNTIL 1912

Izet S. Miftari<sup>i</sup>

Director of the library "Naim Frashëri", Vushtrri (Vuçitrn), Kosovo

Researcher of the Field of History,

PhD candidates in University of Prishtina, Kosovo

### Abstract:

Albanians are recognized as a very tolerant religious people. Despite having more than three basic religious beliefs (Muslim, Catholic, and Orthodox), no religious civil war has been recorded in this nation. Rather, they have co-existed together and have co-operated together for their national and state rights. Religious divisions were only religious diversity (a very important social culture and feature that a nation can have), but no obstacle to the common realization of national goals. Thus, religious tolerance has prevailed even in the Vilayet of Kosovo from the middle of the nineteenth century to the year 1912, when this vilayet was unjustly occupied by Serbs, and unjustly formalized at the Ambassadors Conference in London (December 1912 - August 1913). Known scholar Thomas W. Arnold states: "*Albanians, Muslims and Christians speak a language, cultivate the same traditions, have the same attitudes and habits. Their common national cloak is so strong that there is no place for the religious divisions that have separated the people of this people.*" The religious tolerance of Albanians, built for thousands of years, has influenced today to be present, sustainable and enforceable. Thus, in the Muslim Albanian celebrations (the Greater (Lesser) Bajram), both the priests and the Catholic Albanians go and congratulate them on religious holidays. The same is true of Christian holidays (Christmas and Easter), whereby Muslim imams and Muslims go and congratulate their religious holidays. This is really more than a miracle.

**Keywords:** religious tolerance, Kosovo vilayet, nineteenth century

Although the Albanian people are divided into three different religions, it has never been an obstacle in their common national. In historical sources, published and

---

<sup>i</sup> Correspondence: email [imiftari@yahoo.com](mailto:imiftari@yahoo.com)

unpublished, it is not recorded anywhere that the Albanians had a religious war. Rather, religious diversity that characterizes the Albanian people, maybe it is unique in the world and can be an example of coexistence and interfaith respect for other peoples and countries.

Albanians religions, such as Islam, Bektashism, Catholicism, Orthodoxism, *Protestantism* even Hebraisms have had not only coexisted peacefully and very tolerant, but also respected mutually, as it was only in the direction of a common God.<sup>ii</sup>

In 1830, the Anglican priest, T. S. Hugs, wrote: "*The Mohammedan Albanian is not largest loyal doctrine of rites and ceremonies under the new law, than it was under the old one - so the Ottomans actually watch with great contempt. He often marry Christian woman; boys leads to the mosque; daughters with their mother lets to go to church, and himself, sometimes goes to the mosque or to church.*"<sup>iii</sup>

In 1887, Austrian scholar Valdkampf, who dealt with Balkan studies, wrote: "The Albanians reject religious fanaticism of the Ottomans to that not to consider it at all ... All Albanians, whether Christian, or Muslim hate unify the Turkish occupier ... Albanians have no difficulty making marriage within their society regardless of religious beliefs."<sup>iv</sup> The researcher continues: "*Most Albanian villages don't have Mosques and believers of this religion don't hesitate to co - celebrate Easter with Christians, Orthodox also willingly participates in the Ramadan. Albanians don't have difficulty to make their marriage in the community regardless of religious beliefs. All Albanians, Christian, or Muslim, equally hate Turks (Ottomans, I. M.). These are truths on Albanians*".<sup>v</sup>

Mark Krasniqi brought us two specific examples of religious tolerance of Albanians, which means that you cannot find anywhere in the world such religious tolerance. So in the second half of the nineteenth century, the tribe of Catholic Shkrel in Malesia, decided to build a Catholic church. But they cannot reach an agreement on the land where the church would be built. In such a situation, the Shkrel Lord decided to entrust this matter there, Muslim Albanians brethren. Catholics and all people of Shkrel agreed that where Albanians Muslims decide they will build the church. Therefore, the Albanian Muslims settle for a location that would be built where the Catholic church of

---

<sup>ii</sup> Faton Mehmeti, *Prijës fetarë dhe shpirtëror shqiptarë - Bashkëjetesa ndërjetare dhe kontributi i tyre kombëtar*, Prishtinë, 2015, 13.

<sup>iii</sup> Shyqyri Nimani, *Arnavud – Artistët shqiptarë në Perandorinë Osmane*, Prishtinë, 2003, 18.

<sup>iv</sup> Mark Krasniqi, *Traditional tolerance and national human function*, Lecture at the International Symposium held in Pristina on 14 - 16 April 2009; Mark Krasniqi, *Toleranca në traditën shqiptare*, Akademia e Shkencave dhe e Arteve e Kosovës, Prishtinë, 2007, 38.

<sup>v</sup> M. Krasniqi, *Acts. cit.*, 38.

Shkrel lord. So, they latter kept their word, and built the church in the place where Albanians Muslims had set<sup>vi</sup>.

In prayer on Friday, which was organized on the occasion of the visit of Sultan Mehmed V Reshat in Kosovo (15/28 June 1911), the place where Sultan Murad I was killed, in the Mausoleum of Sultan Murad I (Mazgit village near Pristina), Christians were willing to participate. The book, *Vilayet of Kosovo*, said: "On 15 to 17 June 1911 had come to visit Pristina Ottoman Sultan Mehmed Reshat. Sultan reception by citizens of this country was quite good. He had meetings with people of the highest military and civilian. In this case, they showed different artistic programs by young people who were gathered from other parts of the country. On Friday, was visited the Tomb of Hydavendigarit. In this place were gathered many citizens, among whom Sulejman Batusha and Isa Buletin. In this ceremony, many Christian citizens of the region were ready for the Friday prayer, which was held by Imam Ismail Haka Efendi from Bitola. So, he read the announcement of the Sultan, and Sadri Azemi made a speech to the gathered people. The Sultan also placed the cornerstone of the Madrasa. This Madrassa will be built for those who cannot pay their tax liabilities. Sultan donated 30,000 penny, 5,000 for the construction of madrasa, and 1000 penny for the poor people. (16 June 1911).<sup>vii</sup>

Albanian religious issue was not associated with national perspective and has not been religious fanatic, as todays. The following are two thoughts detach from two anonymous people from last century, to present their views on religion.

An Albanian Muslim wrote: "*Muslim Albanians of Gegëria are not mixed in the nation affairs, have set aside their own language without making honor for Albania. The reason is that enemies (pansllavist clerics I. M.), have been led to believe that writing and reading of the Albanian language is against religion*". This obviously is a lie. Prophet Muhammad in Qur'an said: "*Whoever serves his nation is honest. Then, says: who loves religion loves nation too. Ask for knowledge from birth to death. As you see, religion is not against the Albanian language, but requires people to seek their rights*"<sup>viii</sup>.

"Catholic Albanians have always tried Albanian language. In the XVII century Albanian bishop, Peter Bogdani published one of the first books in Albanian. While the priest Frang Bardhi, has published the first book in Albanian language. So, an Albanian Catholic said that they need to leave the road, which are learning Italian, and opening

---

<sup>vi</sup> *Ibid*, 47, 48.

<sup>vii</sup> Osmnli Arşiv Belgelerinde, *Kosova Vilayeti - Vilajeti i Kosovës*, Istanbul, 2007, 160.

<sup>viii</sup> Faik Konica *Shkrime nga Albania 2*, Prishtinë, 2013, 27 dhe 28.

schools in Albanian, as well as showing that they are brothers with their Albanians Muslims"<sup>ix</sup>.

Cevdet Pasha, who wrote to the Ottoman government in Istanbul, confirming stationary that religion had no impact to Albanians in which, he said: "*The union of mutual love that exists between Muslims and Catholics (Albanian IM) is not observed in any other country in the world. They warmly greet each - other. They fight being under the command of the Catholic Rulers and Muslims under Muslim tribal chieftains Catholic orders*"<sup>x</sup>. In response to Pater John gives Mark Milan (at the time of the League of Prizren, 1878), we understand that the Albanians had no load on religious differences. Rather, it is obvious that Albanian religious differences have not had any impact on the preservation of territorial integrity of Albanian lands<sup>xi</sup>.

Mixed marriages in the mountainous areas of northern region, including Kosovo, were not uncommon, while in the South, the marriages of couples with different religious beliefs were very rare.

In married couples with beliefs opposed religious in northern Albania, as a general rule was, when Christian parents they were given their daughter to a Muslim, children born from this marriage, whether they were boys, become Muslims, and if they were girls educated in the religion of the mother<sup>xii</sup>.

Albanian religious tolerance has been special, proves researcher Peter Bartl, which states: "*How picturesque family life could be in such mixed marriages shows J.G. Eat in reports from his travels in the parish of Padana, which often happened that "pork and one sheep were boiled in a pot and then Christian wife ate one piece (pork, IM) and the Muslim eating the rest (meat of pork, IM)"*<sup>xiii</sup>.

A Vicar from Croatia Lavro Mihačević, who had visited the Albanian lands in the early twentieth century, including the Vilayet of Kosovo, says Kosovo Albanians in religious terms are very tolerant, and for them the most important is ethnicity than religion<sup>xiv</sup>.

In the case of Albanian religious tolerance, particularly of Albanian Muslims in relation to Christians, the majority of West European reporters have different attitudes. Thus, San Giuliano and Hassert believe that the Albanian Muslims are not tolerant in

---

<sup>ix</sup> *Ibid*, 28.

<sup>x</sup>M. Krasniqi, *Toleranca në traditën shqiptare*, 38.

<sup>xi</sup> Zef Mirdita, *Krishtenizmi ndër shqiptarë*, Misioni Katolik Shqiptar në Zagreb, Prizren – Zagreb, 1998, 386; Nuredin Ahmeti, *Kontributi i klerikëve në kryengritjen e vitit 1910 – 1912*, in "*Albanologjia*", Instituti Albanologjik, Prishtinë, 2011, 198.

<sup>xii</sup> Peter Bartl, *Myslimanët shqiptarë në lëvizjen për pavarësi kombëtare (1878 – 1912)*, Tiranë, 2006, 106.

<sup>xiii</sup> *Ibid*, 106, 107

<sup>xiv</sup> Branko Horvat, *Kosovsko pitanje*, Zagreb, 1989, 3.

religious issues, while Karl Steinmetz and Eqrem Vlora, consider that the Albanians are tolerant in religious beliefs.<sup>xv</sup> According to Bartl, the one, and the other is consistent, but should be careful for which province is spoken. So, he (Bartli), as religious intolerant province includes Kosovo, Macedonia and Epirus.<sup>xvi</sup> While Edith Durham cites an example of religious bigotry in Djakovica Thus, Durham writes: "*In the previous autumn (1907) near Djakovica Muslims captured and imprisoned a Franciscan for many weeks. At the same time all Muslim tribes were secretly equipped with Mauser and weaponry, it was said, by the Turkish government. Excited and all the bravado, the Muslims sent an ultimatum to Christians that all those who had not converted to Muslims until Ramadan will be slaughter*"<sup>xvii</sup>. But, in this context, Durham, had written for religious tolerance reigns among Albanians, especially she wrote to the northernmost part, in this case for some parts of Kosovo Vilayet. She (Durham) had left many impressed by the conduct of Albanian highlanders in Plav and Gusinje. According to her, in 1908, he had visited Vuthaj in Guci, accompanied by priest of Theth and some Albanian Muslims. In a highlander Muslim house, they were greeted with brandy, and we know that the use of this drink is forbidden in the Muslim faith. Furthermore, Durham continues, with the first cup of Muslims welcomed the guests led by a Catholic priest, with "*Always Praise Jesus Christ*"<sup>xviii</sup>, to honor above all the priest who had come with others. A missionary priest score that often happens to meet on the streets of Highland strangers and thinking that they are Catholics, and greeted with "*Praise Jesus Christ*". But they were Muslims, and respond without being offended at the "*Always Praise Jesus Christ*"<sup>xix</sup>.

Evidences of the early twentieth century tell us that, at this time there had been some located entanglement in Kosovo between Albanian Muslims and Catholic, despite that, the Albanian scholars, somehow have overlooked and have not published. Researcher, Nathalie Calyer, informs us of a confusion that had happened in the west of the Vilayet of Kosovo between the Albanian Catholic and Muslim. Thus, N. Calyer had said: "*In the today western part of Kosovo, it should be noted that strong conflicts erupted not between Albanian Muslims and Orthodox Serbs, but between Muslims and Albanian Catholics. In Gjakova several times, Catholics stores were boycotted. In 1907, after the kidnapping of a Catholic priest, a pig was slaughtered in the mosque of a village. Further followed a boycott of Catholic farmers spread the word of the desecration of the mosque in Prizren and beyond the*

---

<sup>xv</sup> P. Bartl, *Acts. cit.*, 114

<sup>xvi</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>xvii</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>xviii</sup> N. Ahmeti, *Acts. cit.*, 199.

<sup>xix</sup> M. Krasniqi, *Acts. cit.*, 55, 56

*turn of a general boycott anti-Catholic in the cities of Prizren and Gjakova. On the eve of the Young Turk revolution, relations between Christians and Muslims were strained even more"*<sup>xx</sup>.

There is no doubt that most of these conflicts - confusion religious that do not coincide with the tradition of tolerating the Albanians, have also affected the foreign agents operating in Kosovo Vilayet, and their aimed was to achieve their political goals through the demolition of religious harmony Kosovo Albanians. At this time, in the beginning of the twentieth century, Albanians national feeling had greatly increased and the desire for autonomy as a first step towards the independence of the Albanian lands. Therefore, the increased awareness of the Albanians was a serious obstacle to the realization of invasive Balkan neighbor's goals and their some great powers supporters they had.

However, quarrel that occurred between religions, which have not had a general national nature, but local character, and even closer to local, cannot undermine religious harmony and cannot be completed with findings that the Albanians are not tolerant in religious matter. Such cases cannot challenge the tolerance of thousands of years of Albanians. So even in the nineteenth century, despite the service of foreign powers acting and operating in the Albanian lands, and propagated that religious differences are a serious obstacle to the unification of Albanian national cause, they failed to divide Albanians.

Scholar, Thomas W. Arnold states: "*Albanians, Muslims and Christians speak a language, cultivate the same traditions, and have the same attitudes and habits. Boasting of their common national effort is so many booms that were not religious rifts that have divided the people of this nation*"<sup>xxi</sup>.

The best example of religious tolerance and understanding among Albanians in Kosovo Vilayet was in Guci, at the end of XIX century, in which case, Fathers Martin Sirdani and Alexander Dom Sirdani brothers which were orphaned. In such a situation, the two brothers were rised Gucia Hoxha. After reaching the appropriate age of majority awareness, mullah sent them in Shkodra and placed in Catholic school that they attend classes to become priests<sup>xxii</sup>. For the unique phenomenon not only in the Balkans but also in Europe and beyond, tolerance and understanding Albanian religious, informs us and Franz Baron Nopcsa, although a Catholic , during his visit to Kosovo Vilayet, found refuge and protection was met with generosity and respect from dervishes and mullahs, At the same time, Nopcsa noted that Bektashi of Tetovo and Prizren cooperate with Austro-Hungarians consuls , writing that: "*From Prizren went*

---

<sup>xx</sup> N. Ahmeti, *Acts. Cit*,198.

<sup>xxi</sup> *Ibid*, 199.

<sup>xxii</sup> *Ibid*, 199; M. Krasniqi, *Acts. cit.*, 47.

back to Skopje and from there embarked on a walk to Tetovo (Kalkandelë), which also lasted several days, but somewhat interesting was when in Kalkandele I spent the night in the colorful Bektashi dervishes Great masjid. Since I noticed a good relationship between the representative of tour Consulate and Adam Father, sheikh of the Prizren Bektashi and also again in Tetovo can notice a good relationship between the consul and our Bohumil Paras in Skopje , I came to realize that between these two groups was something special, what course remained as a thing riddle ... I realized that the Austro-Hungarian Empire government was using these people to develop a sense Albanian nationalism among Albanians Muslim ... Later in the afternoon continued further toward Restelica ... in the Mulla Sadiq house ... certainly to the householder came other clergy visitors, among them a Rumanian Hajji . The most people are educated how to write and read"<sup>xxiii</sup>.

The book "Kosovo", published by ASAK (2011), writes since religious beliefs do not recognize state or regional political boundaries, Albanians have had some practices of religious tolerance. So, Albanians of Muslim faith in times of great wars and conquests have protected Christian churches monasteries. The particular case is the protection of Peja Patriarchate in which the last Albanian Rugovian army was in 1913, after the occupation of Kosovo by Serbia, than monasteries of Decani, Gracanica and Devic. (Drenica) etc.<sup>xxiv</sup>.

A very interesting and well-described description of Albanians and their religious beliefs is provided by the researcher from Belgrade, M. Gj. Milicevic in 1876, who textually states: "Everything that is in contravention of Albanian customs and tradition, they (Albanians, I. M.) say that "our faith and religion are not tolerated". Albanians even division in the tribes, associate with faith - religion. Their main tribes are: Berisha, Bytyq, Gash, Kelmend, Kuqe, Mavriq, Shaljanë etc. No matter which religion they belong, the Albanians, (Muslim, Catholic or Orthodox faith) defends and values their own representative as their cousin, and take care for each other. From this, it seems that to Albanians, the most valuable is the tribal affiliation (national, I. M.) than the religious one<sup>xxv</sup>.

Albanians, who were known for religious tolerance, i.e. respect other religions, in the sense of the word, accepted his individual religious faith, and were tolerant and well cared in preserving religious monuments, whether they were or were not of their religious faith. Most interesting cases are no special attention to several families or even beyond, some tribes not only have damaged or looted Orthodox monasteries in Kosovo

---

<sup>xxiii</sup> N. Ahmeti, *Acts. cit.*, 199, 200.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Akademia e Shkencave dhe e Arteve e Kosovës, *KOSOVA – Vështrim monografik*, Prishtinë, 2011, 610.

<sup>xxv</sup> Sabit Uka, *Ç'shkruante M. Gj. Miliçeviq për shqiptarët*, Arkivi i Kosovës, "Vjetari", XXXI – XXXII, Prishtinë, 2004, 215.

Vilayet, but rather are recorded in history data showing that, voivodes of Patriarchy of Pec, Decani Monastery, Devic Monastery and were exclusively Albanians, although belonged Muslim. Thus, this serious care to the monuments in question, that it could not relate only to the aspect of religious tolerance to Albanians, but under all circumstances, these objects of orthodox worship, before "seized" by Serb pan-slavism during the XVIII and XIX centuries, probably were Albanians. Otherwise, the cases cannot be explained not only by care, but also when Albanian voivodes were killed in their efforts to preserve religious monuments orthodox cult.

The phenomenon of Albanian voivodas in Orthodox monasteries in Kosovo, Mark Krasniqi wrote: "*Regarding with these monasteries until the today is kept the phenomenon of "voivodas monastery"*". Voivodeships monasteries were prominent Albanians villages near the church, who for centuries from generation to generation, defended and preserved these monasteries that not to append anything in the most difficult times of the Ottoman (Ottoman), whereas in these areas more time reigned insecurity and anarchy. Usually, they elected chieftain of the tribe and then present to monastery president, and then his choice was approved by Ottoman government. Family voivode protects the monastery on behalf of brotherhood and tribe and whole village. In the monastery always stood an armed man from voivodas house, but in of call from him if necessary, went to the aid of all the men of the village or appropriate tribe<sup>xxvi</sup>.

Here were times where voivods were sacrificed or killed by the attackers or robbers while protecting the monastery. Thus, at Decani monastery, they was voivoda of Sali Rrusta's family, in the Pec Patriarchate was voivoda of Jouyet Veseli from Rugova, while the Devic monastery was protected by Behram family voivoda from Llausha Skenderaj <sup>xxvii</sup>.

It is to note that the Albanian voivodes of Orthodox monasteries had not religion relation, because all were Albanian Muslims. But the origin of voivodas monasteries and the reason for the occurrence of this rare phenomenon of social - human, can be found not only in Europe, in the patriarchal cult, i.e. these religious orthodox temples in terms of the object - the building were ancient times, and the role of the Canon of Lek Dukagjin the Albanians had, when given loyalty to something, in this case the

---

<sup>xxvi</sup> Mark Krasniqi, *Manastirkse vojvode u Kosovsko-Metohiskoj oblasti*, GLASNIK, Muzeja Kosova i Metohija, Prishtinë, 1958, 127.

<sup>xxvii</sup> *Ibid*, 127



preservation of monasteries, must be protected at all price. The canon states that the church has not "stick or rope" to be protected, but its honor guards parish or village<sup>xxviii</sup>.



**Picture 1:** Zhuj Veseli (called Sylë Vojvoda) voivoda monastery of Rugova  
in front of the Pec Patriarch <sup>xxix</sup>

From the data presented, we can conclude that the Albanians are the only people of the Ottoman Empire in the European part, where Muslims and their countrymen Christians, so Albanians of two religious denominations, held joint activities of the national against the Ottoman government and claims neighboring states, which were aimed at the occupation of Albanian territories.

Therefore, religious divisions have not been an obstacle to the Albanians to achieve national goals. Also, the Albanians had no religious hatred against Orthodox, but were forced to stand against their neighbors, who were almost all of the Orthodox faith, and that in many cases have become anti, killing and massacring thousands of innocent Albanians, with the sole purpose and reason, the occupation of their lands. Thus, in such a situation, it is understandable in a way, by such actions of neighboring states of Albanians who were with orthodox religion that influenced the Albanian people to be more reserved on this faith and especially the Albanians of Kosovo Vilayet.

## Conclusion

The interfaith tolerance of Albanians from antiquity to the present day has been and is

---

<sup>xxviii</sup> M. Krasniči, *Manastirkse vojvode u Kosovsko-Metohiskoj oblasti*, 127; M. Krasniqi, *Toleranca në traditën shqiptare*, 97.

<sup>xxix</sup> M. Krasniči, *Manastirkse vojvode u Kosovsko-Metohiskoj oblasti*, 116.

an example for many peoples and states in the world. Although have been made attempts to create and develop hostility between different religious beliefs to Albanians, this could not be achieved, because for Albanians religious affiliation was of the second hand in relation to national and linguistic affiliation.

In 1830, the Anglican priest, T.S Hugs, wrote: "*The Mohammedan Albanian is not largest loyal doctrine of rites and ceremonies under the new law, than it was under the old one - so the Ottomans actually watch with great contempt. He often marry Christian woman; boys leads to the mosque; daughters with their mother lets to go to church, and himself, sometimes goes to the mosque or to church*"

The common national activity of Albanians, regardless of religious beliefs, is certainly the fact with the conviction when it comes to national question, Albanians do not even want to hear about religious divisions. Thus, for example, in the Istanbul Committee, formed on December 18, 1877, which fought for Albanian national rights, had members of three religious denominations: Abdy1 Frashri (Muslim), Jani Vretua (Orthodox), Pashko Vasa (Catholic).

Albanians were tolerant in preserving religious monuments, regardless of the religion they belonged to. It is evidenced in the history that Albanian Muslim families have maintained several Orthodox monasteries and Patriarchate of Peja in the vilayet of Kosovo.

Therefore, the cultivation and preservation of interfaith tolerance among Albanians has been and is an example of the civilization that they have had.

Creative Commons licensing terms

Authors will retain copyright to their published articles agreeing that a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0) terms will be applied to their work. Under the terms of this license, no permission is required from the author(s) or publisher for members of the community to copy, distribute, transmit or adapt the article content, providing a proper, prominent and unambiguous attribution to the authors in a manner that makes clear that the materials are being reused under permission of a Creative Commons License. Views, opinions and conclusions expressed in this research article are views, opinions and conclusions of the author(s). Open Access Publishing Group and European Journal of Economic and Financial Research shall not be responsible or answerable for any loss, damage or liability caused in relation to/arising out of conflict of interests, copyright violations and inappropriate or inaccurate use of any kind content related or integrated on the research work. All the published works are meeting the Open Access Publishing requirements and can be freely accessed, shared, modified, distributed and used in educational, commercial and non-commercial purposes under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License \(CC BY 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).